

THE IDEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION: POST-STRUCTURALISM AND THE LIMITS OF COMMUNICATION*

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There has appeared, recently, an interest in the philosophical implications of communication. This concern has taken two forms: First, “communication” has provided a foundation for accounts of other aspects of human life (e.g., language, human nature, social reality). Such work assumes that it already understands the nature of communication. Second, alternative theories of communication have been generated from particular philosophical perspectives (e.g., phenomenology). Such work substitutes theory for philosophical investigation: its major thrust is to produce new research programs and critiques of other communication theories. One never asks if the grounding philosophy is built upon an unquestioned understanding of communication. In both cases, “communication” itself is not problematized. The first section of this paper will argue that the theoretical discourses on communication available to us, paradoxically, reproduce communication within their very account of it, thus defining communication tautologically.¹

My reading of communication theory will show not only that we have failed to undertake a philosophical exploration of communication, but that such reflections have been effectively blocked. We must, therefore, confront these effective prohibitions on and within our discourse. I will argue that they are constituted by our assumption of the transcendental reality of both subjective and intersubjective meaning. “Communication” articulates the mediation in which the individuality of meaning is transcended in an experience of intersubjective meaning, and thus claims transcendental status for itself – i.e., that it is a universal and constitutive condition of our humanity.

This has at least two significant consequence: First, we are unable to distinguish communication from other forms of signification, since all human reality is seen as significant and all signification is understood on the model of communication. The “discipline” of communication is unable to define its own boundaries since every object or event is potentially “communication,” and the interpretation of messages

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as communication has no grounded methodology. Second, we have ignored questions about the ideological and political power of communication itself. This lacuna is intensified by recent calls for radically new models of communication to deal with new technological possibilities and new political realities, and by the increasing importance that models of interpersonal communication play in our relational and political ideals.

But if the transcendental status of communication results from the transcendental dualism of subject and object reproduced within the concept of meaning, a philosophical investigation of communication forces us to rethink some of the most basic assumptions of our philosophical tradition. For example, the task of philosophy is taken to involve a transcendental account of experience; experience itself is taken as innocently given; consequently the categories apparently present in experience are used as a resource. Even Wittgenstein's reconceptualization of philosophy failed to challenge this transcendental status of experience: discourse is the culprit leading us to look for things that aren't there.

If the assumed innocence of experience is the real culprit, a philosophy of communication will require that we recognize experience as both real and deceptive; i.e., while our experiences are real in that they are the surface in which we live out our lives, they are the product of social and historical processes. Other positions, because they fail to question the innocence of experience, assume the transcendental status of at least certain moments of experience outside of the determination of history: e.g., the self as creative subject and the meaningfulness of reality (apart from any particular structure of meaning). The result is that communication is assumed and granted a transcendental status as the motor force of the production process itself. The alternative that I am proposing fragments and problematizes the production of experience. Furthermore, these processes are themselves implicated in complex ways with investments of power and desire rather than being innocent human capacities. Thus, the categories that appear to be inherent within our experience and are consequently recreated as primitives within our theories must be seen as codes and practices, penetrated by relations of desire and power. These are neither hidden behind our experience nor present within it. They exist on the surface of our experience as that which effectively determines and produces experience itself. By refusing experience its innocence and transcendental status, by locating any phenomenon within a context in which it is "overdetermined" by and effective within a number of interpenetrating but fragmented contexts, such a discourse allows us to question the status of communication as a necessary mediation of the transcendental dualism apparently present in our experience.

At this point, the project of a philosophy of communication has been reconceptualized. Rather than searching for some essential and universal characteristics of communication, it addresses the determining and determined relations between communication and other aspects of our lives. What are the particular involvements and investments of communication in real historical social formations? Why and how is communication posed as a space of particular, yet central, problems? How have we come to see the "truth" of our existence as necessarily implicating us

within a discourse about communication? Without rejecting the everyday understanding of communication, it questions its status — the assumption of the “natural” importance that it has in social existence. Our task is to “denaturalize” the role of communication itself in our lives.

I. The Transcendental Status of Communication in Modern Thought

The first task, then, is to demonstrate that there is, effective within our theories of communication, a prohibition against problematizing the concept of communication itself; that is, that our accounts of communication work only insofar as they assume communication as a given. Furthermore, its nature is specified beforehand — it is the process by which the individuality of meaning is transcended. Thus, the paradoxical status of communication within communication theory is produced by its location within the transcendental dualism of subjectivity/objectivity or, when this is located within meaning, of individual and social meaning.

Obviously, this task cannot be accomplished inductively. A detailed reading of all of the various communication theories, taking into account their particular differences, would be an overwhelming task. Instead, I shall propose a schema organizing the images of communication underlying currently available communication theories.² The six images of communication proposed are not meant to correspond with particular communication theories. Although I will often use particular theories as examples to clarify the images, the more common situation is that particular theories combine a number of images. The images are discursive codes or theoretical vocabularies available as resources for the articulation of communication theories within the present historical–intellectual situation. The schema is organized around three basic images of intersubjectivity, expressing alternative views of the relationship of the individual and the social. Consequently, each of the three images poses the question of how communication is possible in different terms. In this section, I will briefly summarize the three images of intersubjectivity and the resulting six views of communication, and argue that none of them are able to question the nature and transcendental status of communication.

Communication as sharing

The first image of intersubjectivity — “coming together” — involves an absolute, metaphysical distinction between the individual and the other. This may be expressed as either a radical isolation of individuals or an opposition (gulf) between the subjectivity of the individual and the objectivity of the social world. Such an image of intersubjectivity presupposes a *causal* relation between the individual and the social. Thus, either individual acts, events, meanings, etc., produce the social or vice versa. Communication is seen as a moment of sharing, enabling us to escape the very real threat of solipsism. But there must be a meaning that is shared, an objective

or social meaning that is not the exclusive property of any specific individual. Given this minimal condition for describing communication as sharing, there are two options. Either the dualism between the individual and the social is inserted into the very structure of particular meanings, or the subjective aspect of meaning is denied.

The latter, "objective view" of communication fails because it gives meaning a status inherently independent of the subject without accounting for the role or contribution of the individual to the process of communication. The presence of the individual in communication as, minimally, an apparent ground for change, creativity, and particularity (i.e., for the specification of concrete meanings and the introduction of new meanings) can be questioned and even denied. The objective view of communication, however, merely ignores such questions and assumes, *a priori*, that communication is describable without accounting for such aspects of the process.

On the other hand, if one begins with the subjectivity of meaning, then the transcendental duality of subjectivity and sociality must be recreated in the account of communication. This is the function of the concept of the sign, for it gives stability and objectivity to particular meanings that would otherwise be individualized and unknowable by the other. Insofar as the sign involves a real (i.e., a nonsubjectively constituted or social) connection between a material vehicle and a meaning, the meaning is present and available to any number of subjects. The inability of such a view to question communication is obvious: it works only by postulating as given that which it seeks to ground. The problem of communication appears as the need to share essentially private meanings, to escape the subjectivity of meaning. It is solved by postulating the objective presence of meaning within the sign. The sign is the recreation of the question of sharing itself, i.e., the question of communication between isolated and subjective individuals. The apparent paradoxical movement of subjective entities is merely translated into an equally paradoxical transformation of subjective entities into objective or social entities.

This "subjective view" fails to address the relationship between the meanings within the speaker's consciousness and those of the shared sign system. That signs are the means by which we escape the solipsistic subjectivity of meaning is clear; the question of how they perform this function is typically explicated in terms such as conventionality that, once again, merely recreate the assumption of intersubjectivity. The appeal to the sign, within a view of communication as sharing, constantly postpones the question of communication itself, for the sign carries within itself its own meaning and thus introduces a third term into the model (a nonsubjective or intersubjective meaning) whose relation to the subject and the medium of signs remains problematic. One consequence of this constant postponing of the question is that such views are actually unable to account for the creative moment of communication through signs even though they start with the subject as the creative source of meaning. Thus, the image of intersubjectivity as "coming together" and the resulting views of communication as sharing are unable to address the question of communication without assuming or recreating communication

within their solution.³

Communication as emergence

The second image of intersubjectivity — “belonging with” — defines the relationship between the individual and social (or between individuals) as a process of partial and mutual determination. Rather than separating the two terms initially and absolutely, they are held to depend upon each other, at least in part, for their identity and existence. Individuals are actors constantly engaged in interactions with other actors within an already existing context of social reality and relationships. Each of the two terms has a dual existence, at once partly determined by the other and partly self-determining. The domain of the social exists, on the one hand, only insofar as it is continuously reaffirmed by the subject in particular interactions, and on the other hand, it is a structure of stability and trans-individuality. The social world is the context within which particular interactions between individuals occur and are possible. Consequently, it serves to partly determine the particular interactions that partly determine its identity. Similarly, the individual is both determined by the social and determinative of it. Such views directly address the question, merely raised by the image of sharing, of the relationship between individual meanings and the socially shared meanings of signs. Such an image of intersubjectivity presupposes a *functional* relation between the individual and the social; that is, individual acts, events, meanings, etc., function to reproduce, maintain, and change social reality; or alternatively, the social system functions to make possible individual acts, etc.

The question of communication — of the transcendence of the individuality of meaning — is redefined. Rather than trying to unite two distinct domains of meaning, one talks about a directed process of relationship and development, a continuous emergence of creativity within a context of tradition or a process of contextualization and decontextualization. Although meanings exist only within particular speech acts defined by the projects of the interactants, the possibility of understanding (or concretely realized intersubjective meaning) depends as well on the stable structure of meanings and relationships preexisting and determining those particular interactions. The simultaneous emergence of understanding and creativity in any concrete interaction is a function in part of a taken-for-granted, shared stock of knowledge of intersubjective meanings — the decontextualized existence of the social world. If individuals are continuously immersed within their own projects, they are also immersed within a field of meanings that transcends and determines those projects. This immersion defines their existence as socially determined beings, but because individuals are also self-determining, they are able to transcend that social context (tradition) to bring new meanings and projects into it. The individual creatively engages in a process of communication through which the social is continuously reaffirmed, reproduced, and changed (transcended).

There are two views of communication as a process of emergence. A structural

view describes particular speech acts as expressions or manifestations of a social structure of meanings or rules. An interactional view, on the other hand, focuses on the processes of interaction and emergence, describing communication as the ongoing interactional production of understanding (intersubjective meaning). Neither view, however, questions the nature or status of communication. Communication is assumed to require the presence of a real intersubjective meaning transcending the perspectives and projects of the individual. In contrast to previous views, which seemed unable to account for communicative success, the question of emergence makes communication inevitable; the possibility of failing to communicate is jeopardized.⁴

Communication still functions as a transcendental term in such views, undermining the possibility of a radical examination of the concept. In fact, communication is reproduced within each of the two terms — individual and social — as the emergence of meaning from a context of determinateness and self-determination. Consider the social realm: On the one hand, it is a stable body of taken-for-granted meanings that has been determined by a previous history of interactions and determines, in turn, future interactions. On the other hand, it is an ongoing context of interactional emergence. This emergence is not totally determined by the individual projects that set it in motion, nor by the already taken-for-granted social meanings. This real emergence of new understanding or intersubjective meaning, partly determined and partly undetermined, is both the assumption and guarantee of communication.

This social location of the emergence of understanding does not escape the transcendental dualism that protects “communication” from scrutiny. Communication is still assumed to involve a transcendence of individuality. Such views continue to presuppose and reflect a particular image of the individual as subject; this image incorporates within the individual the split between determinateness and self-determination and thus, like the image of the social, merely reproduces the question of communication. To the extent that the individual exists in part outside of the social context as a self-determining agent, communication must involve a relationship between the intentions and meanings of this agent and the social context of interaction within which emergence is possible. This undetermined aspect of individuality is an expression of pure subjectivity, an essential and universal characteristic of human nature. This transcendental assumption — of an undetermined moment of individuality — is necessary if one assumes that communication, creativity, and the possibility of misunderstanding, all imply both a subjective definition and strategic control of the particular interaction and a determinative context of intersubjective emergence.

Within an image of intersubjectivity as “belonging with,” the problem of communication is postponed into that of the relationship between these two moments of the individual’s existence. And this transposed problem is solved only by postulating communication as an innate potential. Consider, for example, the paradoxical notion of competence that is often central to an interactional view of communication: it is a capacity that is determined by the social context and yet is the precon-

dition for all interactions within that context. The individual must already be competent if he is to participate in those interactions that will make him a competent interactant. This dilemma is solved only by assuming that subjectivity can be described as a set of essential and inherent capabilities for engaging in just those sorts of processes and relationships that universally characterize communication (e.g., negotiation, perspective-taking, foresight, empathy). The determined and self-determining aspects of the individual are related to each other by making the latter the locus of an assumed communicative competence that is actualized in the former. The possibility of engaging in communicative processes must exist prior to any interactional involvement.

This innate potentiality is understood differently in the structural view where the subject is an unstructured but potential domain of meaning waiting to be organized by the structure of the social sign-system. Again, a moment of innate potential must be introduced to connect this undetermined subjectivity and the determined existence of the individual; yet, the relationship between these two moments of subjectivity is problematic and, once again, only a particular understanding of communication and its transcendental status can reconcile the subject to itself. The paradoxical fission of the subject — as potentiality and agency — can be overcome and accounted for only if communication is imported as a third term into the individual between its moments. The concept of communication is protected from scrutiny by locating it within a framework of transcendental dualism. Whichever term — individual or social (meanings) — is primitive, there remains an insupportable residue or surplus; the two terms ground and determine each other, but never completely. Neither term is able to give stability to the other and each makes the other partially unstable. Consequently, a third term — communication — is assumed and the dualism appears mediated in the achievement of understanding or real intersubjectivity. This assumption already locates communication as a relationship between two moments or domains of meaning, resulting in communication defining its own definiendum; none of the terms can be radically questioned within this network of assumptions!

Communication as constitution

The phenomenologically articulated image of “sociality” represents a refusal to assume the reality of both the individual and the social. The issue is no longer the “real” relationship between these terms, but the meaningful experience of such a relationship; experience is the new transcendental term. The phenomenologist hopes to avoid the traditional dilemmas by arguing that our experiences are always and already presented to us in a particular way; that is, they are always interpretations or meaningfully present. And in particular, the self-presentation of our experiences is apparently structured as an isolated individual separated from and related to a social world. Intersubjectivity is both an attribute and a product of our experience; it is the sense of the experiences themselves and not some given state of

reality independent of those experiences. The question then becomes how such interpretations are constituted or accomplished within our experience. Such an image of intersubjectivity presupposes that the relationship between the individual and the social is one of *representation* or *signification*: while each term has a different status, there is an isomorphism between the two domains, albeit an isomorphism that can be understood only in terms of the mediating processes of signification or constitution. Similarly, the question of communication concerns the processes by which both individual and social meanings appear as real within our experience.

Two views of communication have been articulated within such an image: the phenomenological and hermeneutic. Both begin with experience and the presence of the sense of intersubjectivity within experience. And both, whether explicitly as in phenomenology or implicitly as in hermeneutics, postulate a transcendental subject as (at least the partial) source and/or locus of such experience. They differ on the structure of experience and on its relationship to the human subject. Despite significant differences, both locate the question of communication in the examination of the interpretive processes by which intersubjectivity is constituted.⁵

A phenomenological view of communication asserts the primacy of the individual subject and sees communication as the individual's accomplishment of intersubjectivity. The reality or presence of social meanings is an interpretation constituted within the individual's experience. Communication does not accomplish any real transcendence of individual meaning but is itself a moment of the individual process of meaning, the result of the particular interpretive processes through which we make sense of our experience with others. The question of communication is that of our interpreting the actions of others within a context that has already been constituted by our perception of the need to coordinate lines of action to accomplish some project.

If, however, the intersubjectivity of meaning (the apparent production of real social meaning) is determined by each individual's interpretive processes, we are thrown back into a solipsism as threatening as that of the first, subjective view. The phenomenologist must address the question of how we coordinate our situated interpretations with those of other actors. The most promising response thus far has been that the constitution of our experience as communicative is a result, not merely of our interpretations, but of our actions in the public world as well. We act in routinized ways that are themselves constitutive of the sense of intersubjectivity and of the reality of social meanings. Communication is an accomplishment of the individual engaged in public and routinized performances of coordinated interaction.

However, the phenomenological view falls back into transcendental dualism as soon as it questions the status of such public routinized performances, of the relationship between these performances and individual interpretations, perspectives, projects and strategies, and of "coordination." Let us consider each of these related questions.

Although the phenomenologist must deny that socially available practices form

an objective social context (a structural view), the nature of these practices remains uncertain. By describing them as routinized and socially available, the phenomenologist implies that they are, in some sense, present independently of the individual, to be strategically chosen and situationally performed. Then they must have some sort of limited objectivity, a transcendental existence different from that of the individual and his projects.

Furthermore, it is obvious that the individual's strategic management of such practices is motivated by an attempt to make their perspective manifestly available to others in order to accomplish their project. It is not obvious, however, how such practices make the individual's perspective present. We have returned to signifying systems and the question is whether they manifest an inherent meaning. Thus, the question of the relationship between individual projects, etc., and socially available practices recreates the question of the relationship between the individual subject (subjective meaning) and the social domain (social meaning).

Finally, if communication is tied to the notion of a real coordination among individually performed, routinized actions, then the notion of coordination seems merely to be a substitute for intersubjectivity. It involves a domain of meaning as well as a point of judgment that is not reducible to the perspective and interpretive processes of the individual. The phenomenological view, like earlier views, finds it necessary to postulate two irreducible moments of meaning: subjective and pragmatic. If they are mutually constitutive, that process remains opaque. At best, the phenomenologist replies that it is in communication that they are reconciled. Communication still involves a transcendence of meaning, from individual projects to coordinated interactions (or vice versa) and remains a transcendental assumption of the framework. The attempt to escape transcendental dualism by "reducing" the reality of intersubjectivity to a question of its presence within the subject's experience fails because its assumptions about the reality of subjectivity and the operation (or "effectivity") of meaning remain unquestioned. Like previous views, it ends by recreating the transcendental argument.

The image of sociality has given rise to a second view of communication — the hermeneutic — in which experience is constitutive of the subjective as well as the social. The hermeneutic view begins by equating experience with understanding as the transcendental (i.e., transcendent and constitutive) condition of both the individual and the social. Within the moment of understanding, they exist together in a relationship of "belonging-together" that is prior to the possibility of any absolute separation between them. (Like two ice cubes that have melted together or a wishbone, we are not sure where they will break or that there is some inherent line dividing two entities.) Within this relationship, the individual and the social belong together and are made present to each other. The experience of dualism must be located within the transcendental moment of understanding. Hermeneutics looks behind the apparent duality of experience to find the transcendental unity of the moment of understanding.

But a radical reflection on communication is effectively prohibited because the model of understanding in hermeneutics is the dialogue or communication itself.

While disagreements arise whether all experience has this structure or whether there may be distorted experiences, and whether “distortion” is to have normative weight, all hermeneutic positions make speaking (dialogue) the fundamental term and the transcendental condition of human existence. Such views obviously cannot question either the status or the nature of communication. The hermeneutic view is the completion of the tradition of our thinking about communication. It not only raises the mediation — communication — to the pinnacle of its edifice by making it the root, it reaffirms that such mediation involves a relationship between two terms (the individual and the social) that are given equal, albeit now secondary, metaphysical status. Communication is still assumed to involve transcendence; the hermeneutic view merely locates the moment of transcendence prior to that of immanence.

The hermeneutic view, furthermore, fails to avoid the dualism generated from the assumption of a transcendental moment of subjectivity (i.e., of a universal human nature that may be historically concretized). This assumption operates at two levels. First, the model of the dialogue carries with it the speaking subject as a creative origin of meaning. Second, by beginning with experience, hermeneutics assumes an agent of the experience. If that experience is transcendental, then the agent must be as well. Heidegger recognized that phenomenology and phenomenological hermeneutics merely replaced the subject—object dichotomy with that of the *logos* and the phenomenon. Similarly, the claim to address transcendental questions seems to require that the philosopher occupy a position outside of the processes of historical determination. Thus, hermeneutics fails to allow us access to the concept of communication because it, too, assumes a transcendental framework, albeit one in which the transcendence of communication is opposed to the *apparent* immanence of subjectivity, an immanence that inevitably transcends itself.

The question of communication

The transcendental status of communication is protected by and thus requires a certain stability of the relationship between the subject and the sign, and of the two terms themselves. The stability of these terms represents the postulation of an origin and presence of meaning within the subjective and social realms, respectively. The latter makes communication possible. The former makes it necessary. Communication presupposes a split within the givenness of meaning: a subjective and a social moment, an immanent and a transcendent moment, and neither term can be totally constituted or determined by the other. Both terms are transcendentals which, along with a term of mediation or transcendence (intersubjectivity, understanding, communication), define the basic constitutive structure of human existence. It is only within this context that communication is opposed to miscommunication, that it operates within a dichotomy of success and failure.

My critique of the situation in communication theory echoes the more general critique of transcendental philosophy articulated by Heidegger in his later writings

and by the post-structuralists.⁶ Both have attacked the “homocentrism” and the “myth of presence” in western thought, without being confident that they could escape. “Homocentrism” refers to the assumption of a transcendental subject that is transparent to itself, i.e., a subject that can separate itself from and reflect upon its contextual experience and existence. Subjectivity becomes transcendental when one postulates an essential and universal human nature apart from the determining processes of the individual’s sociohistorical existence. The “myth of presence” refers to the assumption that there is a meaning or set of meanings that properly belong to a particular sign and that, therefore, are in some way present alongside the material aspect of the sign.

The status of communication can be questioned only by refusing any appeal to either a stable and universal subjectivity present in each individual or a system of signification in which material signs and meanings are stably connected. The two terms — subject and sign — are intimately connected. If the sign is a relationship between a vehicle (signifier) and a meaning (signified), the subject stands in a particular relationship to this divided unity. It can be said that the subject (the “I” of speaking) stands at the bar between the two and constitutes the particular relationship between them. It is this edifice that has dominated our reflections on communication, prohibited us from questioning it, and condemned us to seeing it as sharing, emergence, or constitution. I say “condemned,” although such views are not wrong; communication does appear to play such roles. We do in fact experience ourselves as free subjects creating meaning *ex nihilo* (albeit within limits), living in the presence of stable meanings located within signifying media, systems, and contexts. That we experience ourselves in such terms is, however, not the issue. The implication of this brief series of critiques is that the demand for a radical philosophy of communication can be accomplished only within a *broader* philosophical project, namely, the general critique of the transcendental status of experience in philosophy and its associated philosophies of the subject and meaning.

II. Deconstructive Materialism and the Philosophy of Communication

I will, in this section, suggest the contours of a social contextualist approach to communication, within certain limits. First, the position is not an alternative view of communication as it is experienced. It is a rethinking of the questions that concern the philosophy of communication and it is an intervention into the social discourses of communication at a specific historical moment. In particular, this investigation attempts to interrogate communication from within a “regime of communication” — a social formation in which communication has come, not only to define the truth of human existence but, increasingly, to preoccupy our interpersonal and social resources. Rather than the nature of communication, I am concerned with its power or effectivity within a broader social context. Second, I assume that there are significant differences among the various social practices that are given an apparent unity within the category of communication. Consequently, I

shall limit my reflections to one particular concrete form of communicative practice — the dialogue or interpersonal. This choice is not serendipitous, for it is this practice that has established a hegemony within the category of communication and, hence, within the social discourses on communication.

Third, the interrogation will be conducted only in terms of the problematic relationship between communication, subjectivity, and signification (or discourse). “Deconstructive materialism” focuses on the production of subjectivity within signifying or discursive practices, without reducing reality to discursive practices, signification, or even to signified reality (experience). Discourse does not encompass the Real; rather it traverses and is traversed by it; each sends “lines of flight” into the other, inscribing its codings onto the other. Thus, questions of biological needs, physical constraints, unconscious desires, and social power must all eventually find their place within a philosophical investigation of the effectivity of concrete communicative practices; in the present context, they will appear only marginally. Finally, I do not claim that the present reflections are complete or even that they can be generalized to contain all communicative practices or all of the questions that need to be raised. The particular questions I want to address concern the productivity of communication within discourse and subjectivity and the production of communication with a particular status in the contemporary social formation. I have argued that such questions are effectively blocked by the location of communication within a transcendental framework of subjectivity and signification. We must, then, deconstruct these terms if we are to interrogate communication. Deconstruction, in this context, is an attack on transcendence; the apparent unity of any category of experience is fragmented by locating its concrete articulations within its contexts of determination.

The deconstruction of subjectivity

The deconstruction of the subject does not deny that we experience ourselves as subjects but, rather, that this experience can be taken at face value. The apparent givenness of a stable subjective unity that remains indeterminate and uncontaminated by the structures and processes of its sociocultural existence is denaturalized. No one denies that parts of our individuality are determined socially, historically, and psychologically. Mead described these as the various “Me’s” that constitute the social individual. But there is always more — a surplus or supplement: an essential moment of autonomy that Mead called the “I.” The I is the source of creativity, the locus of inherent rights and responsibilities, and that which determines and stabilizes the meaning of any particular signifying event.

The first moment of the deconstruction of the subject (the I) is obvious: the I is itself socially produced or determined; the I is another Me. In certain contexts, we experience ourselves as subjects but it is the context itself that determines that experience. This is not to suggest that subjectivity is an illusion or epiphenomenon, nor a mechanical cause, simple expression or functional bearer of a prior, externally

existing, stable system of determination.

Two characteristics of the deconstructed subject distinguish it from other notions of the socially determined subject: it is "in process" and productive. To say that deconstruction describes a subject-in-process refers to the concreteness of the processes of determination. The way in which an individual exists as a subject depends upon the determinations of the particular context. Each context defines a space within which the individual can exist as subject and, so, each context installs the individual as subject in a particular and potentially different position; the position is not chosen by the individual, for it is only by already assuming a position that the individual can have its own effectivity within the context, nor is it simply describable as reproduction, although this may be a tendency in certain social contexts. Yet the individual never enters into a context "innocent," devoid of a historical context of subjectivity. Thus the subject is always a "subject-in-process," constantly determined and constantly determining.

And this refers us to the second distinctive feature of the deconstructed subject: its productivity or effectivity even while it is produced and effectively determined. As Coward has stated, somewhat paradoxically, "the subject is absent until it produces itself, decentered in the structure which already includes it."⁷ Thus the individual as subject is an effective determinant within the context within which it is effectively determined. Deconstruction does not reject creativity and change; rather, these are integrated into the processes of determination themselves.

The deconstruction of the subject is, however, still incomplete, for this social subject appears to retain its unity, singularity, and simplicity; it has become another Me, added to other social selves. We must then fragment this subject; not only is it denied autonomy, decentered and dispersed into its context, it is itself seen as a complex and contradictory multiplicity. Although we typically assume, for example, that the single subject is the locus of meaning and insight, of legal responsibility and political freedom, of economic action and interpersonal intentions, etc., deconstruction questions whether these experiences are all determinations of the same posit-ionings within any context. Thus, rather than having a single I that is deconstructed into a single, corresponding Me, we are given a complex, contradictory structure of potential determined and determining posit-ionings of the individual as a social subject. The situation is even more complicated since the individual exists within a variety of contexts at any moment as well as within the historical context of its own positions as subject. We can assume that these multiple social subjective positions exist in complex relationships to one another as well as to other aspects of the determining context. In fact, various subjective positions may have a determining effect on others; some may dominate in particular contexts (without necessarily negating the effectivity of other contradictory positions within the same context); more importantly, some may dominate across a wide range of determining contexts. It is this which will eventually provide my account of the regime of communication. We must first ask how subject positions are determined within concrete contexts.

The deconstruction of signification

Materialism responds that social practices constitute the context of determination, and so it is to particular forms of social practices that we must turn our attention. Social practices are modes of the material transformation of contexts that both determine and are determined by social subjects; that is, forms of social practices both require and install the individual in a specific position vis à vis the material context and the practice itself. I have already argued that the particular social practices that concern us are signifying practices: we must, at this point, deconstruct the sign in order to investigate the particular positionings of the subject determined by those signifying practices referred to as communicative.

Wahl has argued that there are two dimensions defining the sign: function and structure.⁸ Functionally, the sign connects two disparate realms (e.g., ideas and things, individual and social) by serving as an agency of transcendence. The structure of the sign reproduces this transcendence; the sign is a divided unity involving a symmetry or correspondence between, e.g., content and expression, or signifier and signified. Consequently, signification is assumed to involve a stable meaning or set of meanings behind or alongside of the material appearance of the sign-vehicle — “a unit of pure intelligibility, thinkable in itself, independent of that which expresses it, immediate and transcendental.”⁹ If we fracture the transcendental claim of the sign’s function (i.e., the stability of a preconstituted goal), the sign is effective precisely insofar as it contextually produces meaning. This move simultaneously deconstructs the structure of the sign. The effectivity of the signifier produces the experience of a transparent correlation between itself and some non-material entity, a meaning. This productivity of the signifier is a process, itself the product of the contextual articulation of a chain of signifiers. Meaning is, like the subject, a determined and determining effect of a material context. The apparent presence of meaning is not an illusion since meaning is itself effective within the context, but it is the product of practices that arrest the potentially unending movement of signifiers.

The signified is a moment in the chain or sliding of signifiers; the signifier is always inserted into and functioning within the signified. In fact, the signified is a signifier installed in a particular position within the chain. If we could allow the sliding to continue, we would be confronted by the infinite possibilities of meaning of any text (i.e., the effective absence of meaning). It is at those moments when the sliding is stopped, points of “punctuation” in the chain, that particular signifiers are produced in determined positions vis à vis the chain itself. A simple but useful analogy to determined production of meaning is a game of musical chairs: those signifiers that find a seat, that slide under the chain of signifiers, appear as meanings.

But how is the sliding of the signifiers stopped? While the productivity of signification is contextual work carried on in and by discourse, the question of the concrete production of meaning within a particular context remains unanswered. That is, what determines the moment at which the process of structuration is

stopped? Obviously, we cannot appeal to a subject existing outside of the material context of discursive articulation. Individuals do not bring anything into such a context nor take anything away from it that is not already structured by discourse. Furthermore, the determination must be defined immanently within the context itself.

Actually, talking about chains of signifiers is misleading for it implies that material signifiers are stable and self-identical across contexts. Instead, signifiers are constantly being articulated and determined in different ways, in different relations to other discursive and nondiscursive features of the context. Materialism replaces the notion of signifiers with that of signifying or discursive practices: discursive practices produce signifiers in apparently stable relationships to one another and in a particular position vis à vis the others. Discursive practices produce meaning at the same instant that they articulate signifiers.

By recognizing that interpreting discourse through the notion of the sign masks the effectivity of discursive practices, we can now provide an answer to the question of how the praxical context produces the effective experience of meaning. The production of meaning can be replaced by the effectivity of practices. Discursive practices produce meaning; how they do so concretely and contextually is determined by and determines the position of the individual as subject in relation to the signifying chain. In particular, the individual is installed as a "transcendental signifier" within the chain itself; this is both its determination and the possibility of its discursive effectivity (as that which stops the reading, punctuates the chain). Consequently, the description of the concrete and contextual effectivity of discursive practices requires that we recognize that each of the moments – e.g., practice, positioning of the individual as subject, and the production of meaning through the positioning of signifiers – is both determined by and determines the other moments. They are all articulated together. This complex situation in which a number of praxical codings are mutually determined and determining is "overdetermination."

The overdetermination of communication

Returning to a philosophical interrogation of communication, I will describe the productivity of dialogic communication. Then, I will briefly address the question of the ideological function and status of such practices within the context of the contemporary social formation.

My description of communication assumes that it is a particular form of discursive practice. To summarize, first, the individual exists within social practices, in a complex, fragmented, and changing space of determination, constantly worked and traversed by contradictions and having its identity as a subject overdetermined by the conjuncture of practices within which it is installed. Any particular identity is a particular subject-ion or posit-ioning (a positing that is a position) of the individual within the praxical context. But overdetermination is neither simple nor mechanical;

the individual and forms of social practice articulate the context within which they are mutually effective. That is, the productivity of discursive practices involves a particular installation of the subject that is, simultaneously, the determination of the practice as discursive. In general, most discursive practices are effective by producing the subject as language-user (as the "I" of speaking).¹⁰ The question remains whether there may be discursive practices that in fact do not close off the endless productivity of discourse. In this way, the subject position serves to punctuate or stop the sliding of the signifying chain and thus closes off the infinite possibilities of meaning. Discursive practices produce the subject as a transcendental signifier within the signifying chain, a position that effectively appears to be an origin of meaning in general and the author of any particular meaning. Discursive practices, for the most part, install the individual as the authority of meaning.

To specify the effectivity of *communicative* practices, we must recognize that some discursive practices place the subject, in addition, within a space of social relations. There is a dual determination of the subjectivity of the individual, an overdetermination of signifier, self and other. The position of the other as subject is then itself a determined and determining moment within such discursive practices: in communication "you talk to yourself from the place of another."¹¹ Communicative practices position the speaker in a particular subject position, which I will call "conversed subjectivity," but they do so only by positioning the listener in the same place. The conversed subject is produced at the same moment as a "conversed intersubjectivity." However, this intersubjective moment exists only as a particular relationship between two transcendental signifiers within the signifying chain. There is no meeting of minds, no emergent sociality, and no phenomenological constitution.

The claim that communication positions the other as a conversed subject says that the other is articulated in the same relationship to the signifying chain as the self; the other is the mirror image of the self and vice versa. This "double specular" structure (an imaginary structure¹²) structures the signifying chain and closes off the space within which the signifiers can move. The space of communicative practices is elliptical; its closedness is defined by its having two equal centers so that neither is an absolute author-ity or both are. The individuals are set in a circuit of exchange. Communication produces and represents concrete relationships as relations between equals; the communicative practice itself is responsible for making the interaction work, without producing understanding as it is traditionally interpreted by hiding (naturalizing) its own overdetermined effectivity and constituting our experience as dialogic.

Communication and ideology

In conclusion, I want to turn to the question of the relationship between communication and ideology. Here again, I must distinguish two issues. First, I will suggest that communicative practices are inherently ideological. Second, I will briefly

examine the ideological function of communication — the regime of communication — within the contemporary social formation. Poulantzas has recently argued that ideology operates through a process of separation (the fragmentation of real social relations) followed by a reuniting of these fragments into new, imaginary wholes.¹³ In this way, real processes of social power and determination are masked and displaced into ideologically determined representations. Althusser has similarly argued that ideology is the form of representation through which people live the imaginary relation between themselves and their real conditions of existence.¹⁴ Ideology then naturalizes its own productivity, presenting its representations not only as the way things are but also as the way they must be through the imaginary or specular structure of its representation. By locating experience within a mirror structure, ideological practices ensure that the ideologically produced representations are articulated and experienced as the Real. This specular structure operates, in turn, by producing a subject who stands in a particular relation to the meaningfulness of reality presented in ideological representations. “The individual thus lives his subject-ion to social structures as a consistent subject-ivity, an imaginary wholeness.”¹⁵

The parallels between this description of ideological practices and my own description of communicative practices are obvious. Certainly communicative practices fragment the real social relations of determination (within which we exist with the other as overdetermined and effective products of material practices) and then reconstitute the relationship in an imaginary form — the apparent accomplishment of a real intersubjectivity of the dialogue. By producing communication as a relation in which each individual is the mirror of the conversed subjectivity of the other, it masks the institutions and relations of power within which communication is produced and the unconscious as the scene of a desire that is never totally discursive. Yet if power and desire escape, in part, the determinations of discourse (and stand as the Real), discourse and communication can never escape their determining productivity. Furthermore, increasingly, dialogic communication masks real relations of power, etc., determined by nondialogic communicative practices, such as mass communication.

Althusser suggests that all ideological practices place “the subject in the position of a homogeneous subject in relations to meaning, a subject who thinks himself/herself to be the point of origin of ideas and actions.”¹⁶ Once again, this is quite similar to my description of discursive effectivity in general and would certainly include communicative practices. However, it is not clear that ideologically produced subjectivity must always take this form. In fact, I would argue that Althusser has discovered something of the unique form in which ideology is effective in the contemporary world.

This leads me to the final question I will raise regarding the particular ideological effectivity of communicative practices in the contemporary social formation where it is increasingly valorised. While communication and conversed subjectivity have always been a moment of social existence and human subjectivity, within the present context they have been articulated at a particular position, with a particular

status. If discursive subjectivity is required for the reproduction of the contemporary social formation, then the fact that discourse and, increasingly, communication have come to define the essence of human nature, social life and the real locus of our subjectivity is itself a further ideological representation. Thus the very importance and power of communication is a form of domination, for particular interests, articulated within a context of ideological practices. It is this question — the ideological role of communicative practices and the ideological production of the status of communication — that has resisted and blocked philosophical interrogation.

The real question is how and why this has come about? What is the determining context within which communication itself has apparently become determining? This would involve concrete social and historical research. This “genealogy”¹⁷ would investigate the overdeterminations of communicative practices, discourse, and subjectivity on the one hand and, on the other, the effectivity of desire and power (the Real) invested in material practices (discursive, ideological, political, economic, sexual, familial, etc.). I have attempted only to denaturalize communication to open the possibility of examining the ideological complicity of communicative practices.

NOTES

1. See, for example, John Lyons, *Semantics: I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Ragnar Rommetveit, “On Negative Rationalism in Scholarly Studies of Verbal Communication and Dynamic Residuals in the Construction of Human Intersubjectivity,” in *The Social Contexts of Method*, ed. Michael Brenner, Peter Marsh and Marilyn Brenner (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 16–32; and Richard Lanigan, “Communication Models in Philosophy: Review and Commentary,” in *Communication Yearbook 3*, ed. Dan Nimmo (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1979), pp. 29–49.
2. Lawrence Grossberg, “Intersubjectivity and the Conceptualization of Communication,” unpublished paper.
3. Such images of communication are most obviously determining in the range of linear or transmission views of communication. An objective view is obvious in David Berlo, *The Process of Communication* (New York: Holt, 1960). A subjective view operates in C. David Mortensen, *Communication: The Study of Human Interaction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).
4. Structural images of communication can be seen in, e.g., Leonard C. Hawes, “Elements of a Model for Communication Processes,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973), 11–21; and Robert E. Nofsinger, Jr., “The Demand Ticket: A Conversational Device for Getting the Floor,” *Speech Monographs* 42 (1975), 1–9. An interactional view is operative in the recent interest in symbolic interaction theory. See, e.g., Donald F. Faules and Dennis C. Alexander, *Communication and Social Behavior: A Symbolic Interaction Perspective* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978).
5. The vocabulary of a phenomenological view is obvious in Barbara J. O’Keefe, Jesse G. Delia and Daniel J. O’Keefe, “Interaction Analysis and the Analysis of Interactional Organization,” in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 3, ed. Norman K. Denzin (Greenwich: J.A.I., in press); and Stanley Deetz, “Words Without Things: Towards a Social Phenomenology of Language,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973), 40–51. The

- hermeneutic view is apparent in Leonard C. Hawes, "Toward a Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Communication," *Communication Quarterly* 25 (Summer 1977), 30–41; and Karl-Otto Apel, "The A Priori of Communication and the Foundation of the Humanities," *Man and World* 5 (1972), 3–37.
6. For a discussion of the later works of Heidegger, see Otto Poggeler, "Being As Appropriation," *Philosophy Today* 19 (Summer 1975), 152–78. For an overview of poststructuralism, see Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977); and M. Francois Wahl, "Appendix: Toward a Critique of the Sign," in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, ed. Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, tr. Catherine Porter (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979), pp. 347–65.
 7. Rosalind Coward, "Class, 'Culture' and the Social Formation," *Screen* 18 (Spring 1977), 102.
 8. Wahl, *passim*.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
 10. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).
 11. Coward and Ellis, p. 79.
 12. Lacan.
 13. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Class* (London: New Left Books and Sheed & Ward, 1975).
 14. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, tr. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127–86.
 15. Coward and Ellis, p. 76.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
 17. On the notion of a "genealogy," see for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977); *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978); and "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordin (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 78–108. On the question of the Real, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking 1977).